

South Colony Basin Recreation Fee Proposal

Purpose and Need for Collecting Fees in South Colony Basin:

Forest Service appropriated funds have not been sufficient to maintain current recreational services and environmental protections in South Colony Basin. Revenue from the proposed fees will help close the gap. Management of recreational use and protection of the environment in South Colony Basin presents many challenges not found in other backcountry locations; such as maintaining costly summit trails, managing social and environmental impacts at campsites, restoring degraded alpine ecosystems, supporting search and rescue operations, dealing with human waste, and providing quality recreational experiences despite high levels of visitor use.

Recently constructed summit trails and stabilized alpine slopes in South Colony Basin will require regular maintenance to protect the nearly \$1,000,000 investment in these facilities and restoration treatments. Funding opportunities through private foundations for continued trail maintenance and slope restoration are very limited. Forest Service funding for trail maintenance has been “flat” for the past several years and is not expected to see major increases for the foreseeable future. The funding available for education and enforcement of backcountry etiquette and regulations has similarly been strained. Relying on recreation use fees appears to be the best option for providing future high quality backcountry experiences and protecting the natural environment.

Preliminary Fee Proposal:

- Designated Fee Area – The entire South Colony basin above the new trailhead on the San Isabel N.F and the Cottonwood Lake basin on the Rio Grande N.F., including the climbing routes to the summits of Crestone Peak, Crestone Needle and Humboldt Peak.
- Proposed Fee Season – May 15 through October 15 (when services described above are available).
- Proposed Fee - \$10 per person per trip for day-use only, and \$20 per person per trip for overnight use.
- Anyone over the age of 18 must have a special recreation permit to be in the area.
- Permits may be obtained at local Forest Service offices, at the trailhead for those with exact change, or on-line through the National Recreation Reservation Service (NRRS) at <http://www.recreation.gov/> (Note: NRRS assesses a reservation service charge of \$9 per party).

Background:

South Colony Basin and the surrounding 14,000-foot peaks offer a broad range of recreational opportunities, including camping, hiking, backpacking, mountaineering, fishing and hunting. This diversity of activities, combined with the natural beauty of the basin and the rough but passable access provided by the road, has made South Colony Basin the most popular destination in the Sangre de Cristo Range. Trailhead register data indicate 3,500 to 4,500 persons (7,000 to 9,000 visitor days) visit the small (1500 acre) upper basin at the head of the South Colony drainage during the summer season.

Over 80% of these visitors intend to climb one of the surrounding peaks. Hunting, fishing, riding ATVs, and 4-wheel driving are the primary recreational motivations for less than 10% of the visitors in South Colony Basin. Over 50% of the visitors have primary residences in the Denver metro area, followed by residents of El Paso County. As Colorado's Front Range cities are projected to grow by another one million citizens by the year 2020, so also use of South Colony Basin is expected to rise.

Weekend use is significantly higher than on weekdays. On average, 30-50 persons are in the basin on a typical summer weekday, with 80-150 persons on typical weekends. On occasional peak weekends, well over 200 persons may be in the basin. Length of stay is typically one night, followed by two night stays, with only a few groups staying longer than two nights. Most visitors to South Colony Basin are here to climb the surrounding fourteen thousand foot peaks, and accordingly mirror the characteristics found in the climbing community. Visitors are most typically 25 to 40 year old males in groups of 2 to 4 persons. Groups of friends rather than family groups are the norm.

A 2006 inventory of campsites identified 57 backcountry sites in the upper basin, 16 sites near the upper trailhead parking area, and about 20 sites along the road. An earlier 1994 survey of the area identified 33 backcountry sites in the upper basin, 7 sites near the upper trailhead parking area, and 12 sites along the road. Overall, 41 new campsites have been established over the past 12 years. Also, many of the previously established campsites increased in size and severity of disturbed bare ground.

Since 1996, the Forest Service has worked in partnership with Rocky Mountain Field Institute, Colorado Fourteeners Initiative, Colorado Outward Bound, and other educational and environmental service organizations to reconstruct trails and climbing routes within the basin, stabilize eroding alpine slopes (caused by user-created trails), inventory and restore undesirable campsites and social trails. To date, nearly \$1,000,000 (of mostly non-federal funds) and 40,000 volunteer hours have been spent restoring long-term recreational impacts, rebuilding the lower road, constructing trailhead facilities and creating sustainable summit trails in South Colony Basin.

The recently constructed trails / climbing routes, and stabilized slopes will require regular maintenance to protect our investment in these restoration treatments. The routes are standing-up to current levels of use, but will likely deteriorate if recreation use continues to increase at the present rate. Funding opportunities through private foundations for continued trail maintenance and slope restoration are very limited. Forest Service funding for trail maintenance has been “flat” for the past several years and is not expected to see major increases for the foreseeable future. The funding available for education and enforcement of backcountry regulations and etiquette has similarly been strained.

- Estimated number of South Colony Basin visitors – 3,500 to 4,500 / season.
- Average annual growth in visitation – 3 to 5%
- Average party size – 2.5 persons
- Average length of stay – 2 days (1 night)
- Backcountry use in South Colony Basin is exceeding Forest Plan standards for “crowding” every summer weekend and some weekdays.
- The Recreation Fee Demonstration Program (P.L. 104-134), which was legislated in 1996 and re-authorized by Congress in subsequent years, allows the Forest Service to collect recreation use fees to offer recreational opportunities, protect natural resources and provide for the health and safety of visitors.



Busy weekend near the upper trailhead – 2006

In 2007, District Ranger, Paul Crespín, signed a NEPA decision notice which authorized the following actions to protect the physical and biological environment surrounding the lakes, streams, trailheads, and routes to the nearby peaks from the steadily increasing levels of recreation use in South Colony Basin.

- Close the South Colony jeep road to vehicle travel approximately 2.5 miles below the current terminus of this road.
- Construct a parking area and camping facilities near the proposed road closure point at the near road terminus at the lower stream crossing.
- Prohibit campfires within ½ mile of Lower and Upper South Colony lakes.
- Restrict camping within ½ mile of Lower and Upper South Colony lakes to “designated campsites” only.

Construction of the new trailhead and camping facilities surrounding the new road terminus at the lower stream crossing is now complete. Closure of the road to public travel above the lower stream crossing will be in effect at the start of the 2010 season of use.



BEFORE



AFTER

Public Services and Environmental Protections to be provided through Fee Collections:

- Maintenance of specialized summit trails
- Ecological monitoring and restoration efforts
- Designated campsites - better camping experience (more privacy, cleaner, better natural aesthetics)
- WAG bags provided at trailhead for voluntary use in the basin (improved aesthetics and public health, with fewer impacts to environment)
- Wilderness Ranger presence (better security, better enforcement of backcountry etiquette, improved recreational experiences through active management of recreational settings and social behaviors)
- Maintenance of portal areas and facilities
- Installation of trash dumpster at county road (if needed to reduce impacts at trailhead or local businesses)
- Support for search and rescue services
- Continued partnership and volunteer stewardship opportunities
- Provide conservation education products and services
- Improved protection of natural resources and recreational settings
- Provide continued opportunities for physical and mental challenges, bonding with nature and companions, a sense of risk and accomplishment, all in a spectacular setting

Estimated Costs for Public Services and Environmental Protections:

• Wilderness Ranger (salary, per diem, vehicle, equipment)	\$20,000
• Trail Maintenance (20 days for a 4 person partnership crew)	22,000
• WAG Bags (\$1.65 / bag x 5000 bags (initial) x 10,000 bags (year #3)	8,000 to 16,500
• Facilities Maintenance (kiosks, signage, campsites, bridges-2)	2,000 to 5,000
• Environmental Monitoring (6 days of partnership crew + lab fees)	2,500
• Environmental Restoration (10 days for 4 person partnership crew)	11,000
• Fee collection costs at trailhead, FS offices and Westcliffe vendors	2,000
• Printing permits	1,000
• Brochures showing regulations, map of designated campsites and etc.	2,000
• Support for Search and Rescue groups (\$1,000 per incident)	5,000
• Trash service at county road (if needed to reduce impacts)	5,000
• 5% OH tap to Regional / Washington Offices	<u>5,000</u>

Annual Costs for Recreational Services and Environmental Stewardship	\$97,000
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